

Creative Developments



David Broda

The Menschel Media Center provides a high-quality collaborative atmosphere for a devoted community of students, renowned artists, and photography aficionados

By Amy Shires



Visitors view a photography exhibition in the main gallery of the Robert B. Menschel Media Center.

Describing the somewhat mysterious and indefinable nature of the creative process, author E.L. Doctrow compares the art of writing a novel to driving a car at night. “You can see only as far as your headlights,” he says, “but you can make the whole trip that way.” On some level, parts of the creative process for nearly any art form may require darkness, where ideas can safely be developed before being exposed to the world’s light. For artists whose medium is photography, darkness is even more essential—quite literally necessary to the creation and “development” of their work. “There’s something truly magical about it,” says Gary Hesse G’92, associate director of Light Work and the Community Darkrooms at the new Robert B. Menschel Media Center, “especially when you’re working in black and white and can actually watch a photo develop in front of your eyes.”

“Magical” might also be used to describe the transformation of the former Watson Theater Complex on Waverly Avenue into the renovated home of Light Work and its programming affiliate, the Community Darkrooms, which have shared space since 1973. The new media center was dedicated in May 2001, following six years of planning and nearly two years of design and construction. It

is also the home for UUTV, a student-run television station; WJPZ, a student-run radio station; the Food Works grocery store; and Watson Theater, a 250-seat lecture hall.

One of the nation’s preeminent nonprofit arts organizations, Light Work was created to support emerging and under-recognized visual artists working in photography and related media through exhibitions, artists’ residencies, grants to local photographers, special projects, and *Contact Sheet*, a publication that is distributed five times a year. The Community Darkrooms is a state-of-the-art public access photography facility that

provides Syracuse University students and Central New York residents with access to the equipment and materials needed to produce black-and-white and color photographs, learn new photographic skills, experiment with digital photography, and use high-end digital output services. “Next year, Community Darkrooms celebrates its 30th anniversary,” Hesse says. “In all that time, its programs have remained

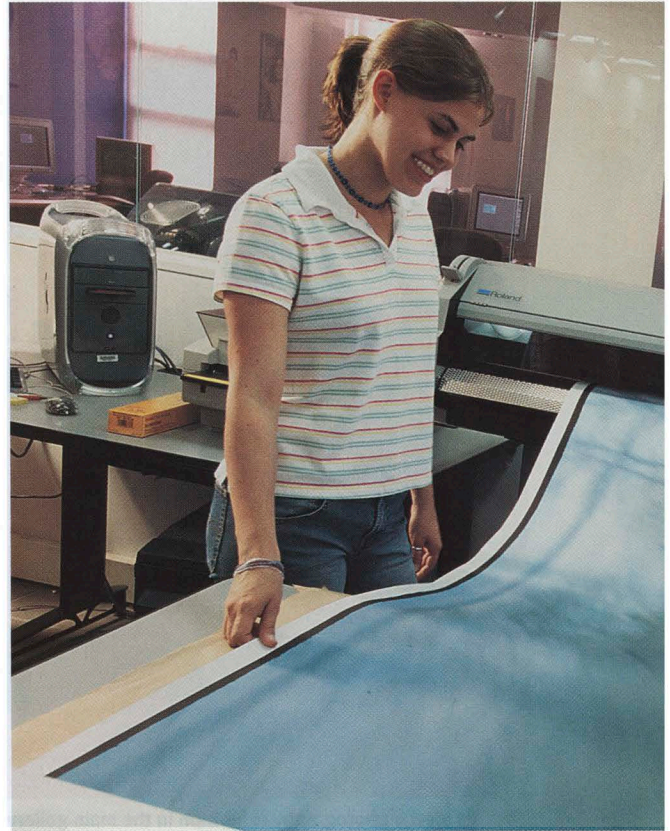


Gary Hesse G'92, left, and Jeffrey Hoone of Light Work and the Community Darkrooms check out some photography prints and slides.

true to the initial spirit of gathering together a community of people interested in photography to share ideas, share work, and create new work."

The renovated facility doubles Light Work's space to more than 10,000 square feet and houses a new main gallery, expanded color and black-and-white darkrooms, a digital imaging lab, a collection storage area, and space and equipment for preparing exhibitions and publications. The center also includes two darkrooms and a computer lab for the exclusive use of photographers participating in Light Work's artist-in-residence program. Three separate galleries are integrated into the lab facility, including one that allows for multimedia presentations and features Internet connections and a 42-inch plasma display screen to further integrate traditional and electronic presentations. "The Menschel Media Center adds yet another dimension to our co-curricular program for SU students with interests in radio, television, photography, and computer imaging," says Barry L. Wells, senior vice president and dean of student affairs. "We're excited about the expanded opportunities students have to interact with faculty and pursue knowledge beyond the classroom. Opportunities like these define the rich educational experience at Syracuse and support the Academic Plan."


The project was made possible with a \$2 million naming gift from longtime Light Work supporter and Syracuse University Trustee Robert B. Menschel '51, H'91. The University contributed the balance of



Megan Alter '03 prints a photo using the 42-inch archival digital printer.

the \$3.2 million renovation cost and managed the design and construction. "We have a long and tremendously beneficial relationship with Robert Menschel," says Jeffrey Hoone, director of Light Work and the Community Darkrooms. In the early '80s, Menschel provided a grant that allowed Light Work to hire a second staff member. He later funded the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery in the Schine Student Center, a main exhibition space for Light Work. "That space gave us more visibility," Hoone says. "Menschel's ongoing support has enabled us to move forward from his first gift. This new space is a result of his continued generosity and his vision." The Light Work staff is goal-oriented and shares a strong commitment with Menschel to quality and maximizing resources, Hoone says. "His love for the University plays a key role in our relationship. He has a deep attachment to the University, and a big part of that is always trying to make SU better."

In forming his vision for the center, Menschel enlisted the help of his friend, prominent New York City-based architect Richard Meier, who contributed design concepts for the glass-block exterior and full-height entrance doors. Syracuse architect Mike Wolniak '78 incorporated those concepts into a design that Hoone describes as "an elegant combination of form and function." Menschel also encouraged Light Work staff to solicit renowned artist Sol LeWitt '49 for a contribution to the project, resulting in a gift of one of his celebrated wall drawings, which

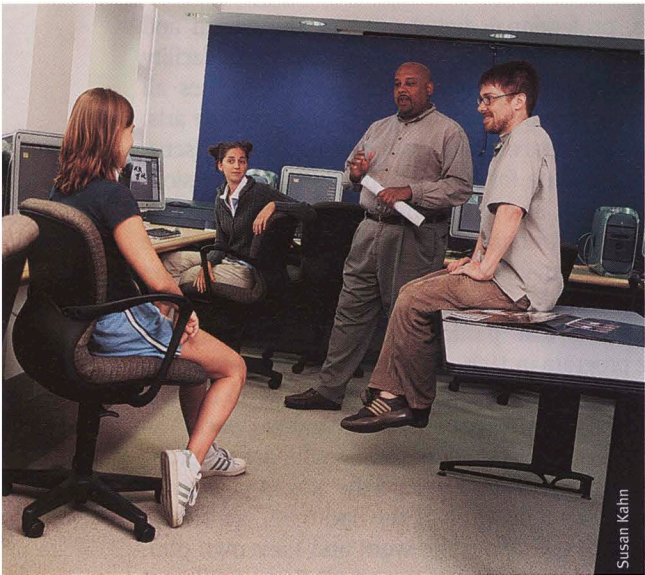


“We like to think about the range of artists, from traditional photographers to those working with technology. The medium is constantly changing and expanding.”

— Gary Hesse



The center blends form and function in its design.



Community Darkrooms lab manager Vern Burnett, second from right, meets with a group in the Macintosh digital lab.

has been installed in the center's main foyer.

Enhancements to the lab facility, which is open to members of the SU community, the general public, and Light Work artists-in-residence, include a 10-station Macintosh digital lab with high-end scanners and a 42-inch archival digital printer. The photography lab features areas for black-and-white film developing and separate facilities for making black-and-white and color prints, including a 30-inch

color processor. A classroom and studio space are also available, as well as a large work area for viewing and finishing prints. “We like to think about the range of artists,” Hesse says, “from traditional photographers to those working with technology. The medium is constantly changing and expanding. We think about that in the work we exhibit and publish, and the spaces we create for artists to work in.”

The expanded black-and-white darkroom is just one example of the facility's many improvements and represents the organization's commitment to supporting visual artists working in photography and digital media. “Here, people can work in photography the way they have for the past 150 years,” Hesse says. “Even though this is how photography has existed since its beginnings, black-and-white photography is still a standard, and may be the most popular thing we do here. That's a strong reminder to us that, although we always want to look to the future and think about what artists are doing with technology, we never want to lose sight of where photography has been.”



This work area provides photographers with space to put the finishing touches to their prints, mat and frame them, and prepare them for exhibition.



A wall drawing by artist Sol LeWitt '49 is on display in the center's main foyer.

What Artists Are Saying

"There is simply no other place like Light Work," says photographer Tony Gleaton, a three-time artist-in-residence at Light Work. "If you didn't know anything about the organization, you'd be surprised that it's all held together by a small but highly motivated number of people. They are there simply to serve the artist. You come to Syracuse, they greet you and make sure you are settled. Then they hand you the keys to the place and encourage you to feel no boundaries."

Gleaton, who returned to Light Work this past spring with his exhibition *Tengo Casi 500 Años*—which features portraits depicting Africa's legacy in Mexico, Central America, and South America—is impressed with the center's improvements. "Everything is beautiful and top notch," he says. "Yet the core of the place—the heart of Jeff Hoone and his merry men and women—has stayed true. It is always a pleasure to be involved with them. They make you a part of the family, and for that I feel lucky. Plus they work so damned hard. It is motivating."

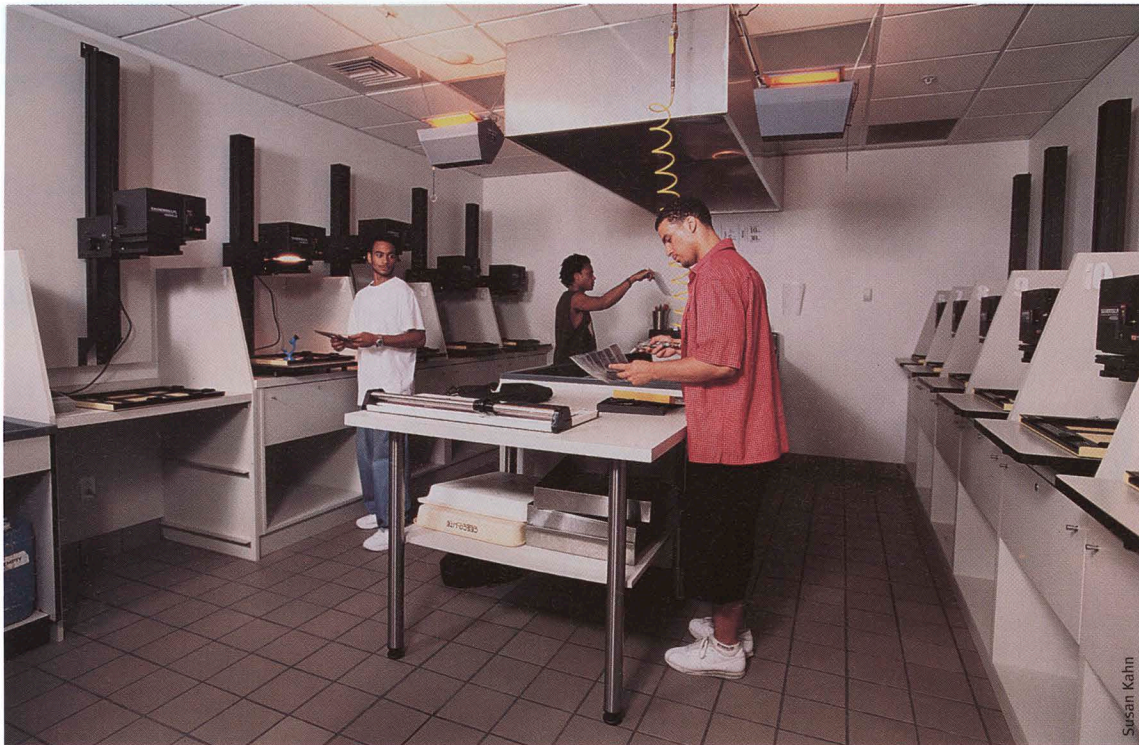
The improvements are "wonderful," says London-based photographer Max Kandhola. "High-end com-

puters, professional digital printers, the design and planning of the black-and-white darkroom facility and color printing—it's a place that welcomes all who want to participate in photography and the arts. The theater space provides opportunities for discussion and debate for students, professors, professionals, amateurs, and local community members. That's what Light Work and the Community Darkrooms are all about—providing an environment for exploration of ideas, passion, communication, and expression."

Kandhola first participated in the artist-in-residence program in 1996, and was invited to return this year. "Light Work has been a major factor in the distribution and visibility of my photographic work," he says. "It is a community of people who are generous in providing assistance toward the artist's objectives. The students who work at the darkroom are always on hand to talk about the work and their own photographic studies. There's a constant flow of different people using the facilities and exchanging ideas." He also values Light Work's international reputation. "They've invited many artists from England and Europe to participate in their programs, with great success," he says. "*Contact Sheet* is recognized by all major photographic publishers, curators, galleries, and museums."

Gaining Experience

During his sophomore year, Matt Carvette '03 stepped up to the position of general manager for



Photographers examine prints in the black-and-white darkroom.

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UUTV, the nation’s largest student-run college television station. In this role, he oversees all the station’s departments, including production, promotions, and operations. “We have three types of programming,” Carvette says of the station, which broadcasts on Time Warner Channel 10 in Syracuse and worldwide at uutv.syr.edu. “There’s news, featuring campus and local news five nights a week; entertainment, including game shows and sketch comedy; and sports, covering SU football, basketball, and other college athletics.”

The majority of UUTV staff members are enrolled in the Newhouse School, but Carvette says the opportunity to gain experience at the station is open to all SU students. They serve as producers, directors, and editors; work with cameras, sound, lighting, and graphics; or handle aspects of promotions or programming. “We have about 250 student employees who come and go throughout the year,” he says. “And they’re from just about every school and college at the University.”

Although UUTV lost studio space in the facility’s renovation, Carvette and his staff aren’t complaining. “Our new space is so much cleaner, newer, and nicer,” he says. “Overall, we’re very happy with the changes.”

Ryan Thompson ’02, originally from New York City, moved to Syracuse as a high school freshman,

when her father took a position as a professor of illustration at the College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA). She’s volunteered at Light Work and the Community Darkrooms ever since, in exchange for use of the facilities. “I used to be a dancer, but when I was injured I looked for another creative outlet and became interested in photography,” she says.

Last May, Thompson graduated from VPA with a degree in art photography, and she plans a move to London this fall. “I love the art scene there,” she says. “Through Light Work, I met many visiting artists from London, and Gary Hesse set me up with people to contact. My own work changed a lot because of Light Work. I learned how to run everything during my years there and began doing a lot of digital work. The new facility is outstanding, although I thought it was amazing before. We’re lucky to have such wonderful support in Syracuse, and the chance to meet famous artists. Working along with the visiting and local artists is so helpful to students. There’s always someone looking over your shoulder, giving you tips. It’s a real community and a wonderful place to learn.”